

Conclusion

Over the past year, the Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform has spent considerable time investigating community-based strategies to reach youth, as well as options to improve programming and the overall operation of the juvenile justice system. In addition to the identification of best practices in the District of Columbia, Commission members visited other cities and states to learn more about how other jurisdictions maintain youth safety. We have learned many crucial lessons, not the least of which is the discovery – or, in some cases, rediscovery- that we have many people in our own neighborhoods and in District agencies who love and care for children and youth each day. Youth and those who work with young people have occasionally affirmed the Commission’s impressions and, in other cases, opened a Commission member’s eyes about a particular need or challenge. Together, these various conversations have helped us to understand how to simultaneously hold young people accountable for antisocial behavior and nurture them in various contexts.

The Commission’s core findings cover three broad themes- youth and community development, programming in the juvenile justice system, and administrative and legislative oversight. Attention to the issues outlined below should enable us to address current needs and strengthen existing structures:

- 1. Critical data, information, and research related to recidivism, community supervision, probation revocation and other outcomes is needed to assess youth services and the juvenile justice system.** Data and information must form the basis of

sound policy and planning in every part of the juvenile justice system. The lack of critical analysis and research related to juvenile arrest patterns, diversion, recidivism, probation revocation, or characteristics of populations served is a major problem. Sometimes, data and information are being collected but not analyzed. Planning for youth services or quality programming in the juvenile justice system cannot take place without attention to important variables impacting child and family well being, community development and youth opportunities, and other measures related to the effectiveness of outreach strategies geared toward young people in the District of Columbia.

- 2. There is over detention and over commitment of juveniles. More diversion opportunities and home and community-based programming options are needed to keep youth out of the juvenile justice system.** Detention and commitment of status offenders, including PINS and truants, and other offenders, including UUV (unauthorized use of a vehicle) passengers and first-time drug users, provides an example of areas where excessive detention is occurring. Perhaps most importantly, diversion opportunities appear to be decreasing at a faster rate than the youth population. Given the poor state of juvenile arrest analysis, it was impossible for Commission researchers to analyze how multiple charges in bookings might impact diversion trends or how rates of population change among children and youth definitively correlated with arrest patterns. Diversion levels have recently eroded at the Superior Court, with the number of diversion cases falling from 690 in 1999 to 553 in 2000. MPD has consistently diverted about 300 cases per year over the past two years.

- 3. A stark racial and social disparity in detention and commitment needs to be analyzed to discover at which point in the juvenile justice system disparities may be generated and why they may be occurring.** The juvenile justice system in Washington, D.C. is 100% African American and Latino, meaning that these youth account for 100% of those confined and detained. According to the most recent report from OJJDP, the District of Columbia is the only jurisdiction with 100% minority representation in residential placement. Given the disproportionate representation of these youth in the juvenile justice system, Commission members urge future study to assess the factors that have produced this marked disparity.
- 4. There is a need for child and youth-friendly state-of-the-art detention (pre-trial/pre disposition youth) and commitment facilities, as part of a strategy to establish a seamless continuum of care for youth in secure and non-secure contexts.** The lack of a state-of-the-art detention center in the District of Columbia, as well as the poor physical condition of Oak Hill, has contributed to poor programming, over detention and commitment, and a lack of coordination of service delivery for juveniles and families. In order to meet the needs of children and youth who enter the juvenile justice system at various levels of pre-trial and commitment status, the Commission recommends three courses of action: *first*, the demolition of the outdated Oak Hill Youth Center in Laurel, Maryland, once plans for a new rehabilitation and treatment model for child and youth friendly services is established as part of an Oak Hill sunset and raising of a model for smaller cottage and home-like treatment based model consistent with the William

Woods/Rosa Parks model (see Appendix for photographs) and other individualized and specialized care options visited by the Commission in Missouri; *second*, the construction of a state-of-the-art detention center on Mount Olivet Road, with its proposed network of services and multidisciplinary assessment and treatment pods.; and *third*, continued support for the expansion of home and community-based options for placement of youth in their communities and neighborhoods. The Commission firmly believes that these steps are necessary to reform a fragmented juvenile justice system and ensure a seamless delivery of services for youth who may be in various stages of detention and commitment status.

5. Blended sentencing will provide judges with more flexible options to promote rehabilitation and treatment among offenders who may be sentenced as adults.

Blended sentencing affords judges with the flexibility to assign treatment in the juvenile system, but also the option to enforce accountability with an adult sentence if rehabilitation of a juvenile is not deemed successful. Contrary to some perceptions that the “flood gates” will open with the establishment of blended sentencing, several states- including Missouri with the lowest juvenile recidivism of any state in the country- have not witnessed an upward trend in adult certification.

6. An end to direct file authority and the institution of transfer hearings for youth is necessary to establish appropriateness of rehabilitation for youth. Since 1970, the establishment of almost unchecked prosecutorial authority in the District of Columbia has enabled some youth to be tried as adults without a transfer hearing. Arguments that

this strategy is necessary to address increases in violent crime are unfounded for children and youth in the District of Columbia. Indeed, there is no 13 or 14 year old juvenile “super predator.” The Commission supports an end to the direct file authority of the United States Attorney, as well as the institution of transfer hearings for juveniles.

7. Comprehensive strategies are needed to ensure that youth do not enter the juvenile justice system. An expansion of opportunities is needed to meet a need for critical employment, health, mentoring, and recreational services for young people.

Children and youth represent the potential of any community. The Commission supports the design of more comprehensive community-based investments in children and youth as a first step to prevent exposure to risk factors for crime and violence. Recognizing that the city’s leadership team has ended receiverships in child welfare and other areas, it is critical that the city continue down the path of aggressive human service reform and public/private partnership. Youth must be afforded employment and academic mentorship programs, for instance, so that they may possess enhanced opportunities for occupational and social mobility.

8. In order to accomplish the goals for a new system of youth development and programming in the juvenile justice system, a culture change should be established requiring that all individuals working with youth adhere to youth development principles. The Commission believes that youth development principles will strengthen professional culture in various agency and institutional contexts, which, in turn, will enhance programming and youth cultures in many positive ways. People who work with

youth must adopt the highest professional standards in order to ensure that young people do not fall in harm's way. This includes attention to programs that capitalize on youth assets and training of all youth service providers in youth and community development theory and practice.